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The Mount Marshall Marathon

Four decades later, walking back up a streambed

Lisa Ballard



THE FIRST TIME I CLIMBED MOUNT MARSHALL, IN 1977, I WAS PART OF A group of local Lake Placid teenagers. I don't remember much of the climb, except my soggy feet and scratched-up body. Marshall is one of the twenty peaks among the Adirondack Mountains' 4,000-footers that is trailless. Climbing it was . . . miserable.

In the 1970s, only about 500 people had ever succeeded in summiting all 46 Adirondack mountains over 4,000 feet. Though much lower than the highest points in the Rockies or the Alps, the Adirondack High Peaks are big in vertical gain, and some of the peaks are truly remote, including Mount Marshall, which sits at the southwestern end of the MacIntyre Range. Our tenacious troupe covered a blur of miles and mudholes to get to the base of the mountain, then bushwhacked up a streambed to ultimately reach the treed summit. The only reward would be adding my name to the hiker's log inside a small metal canister bolted to a boulder, but even that promise proved futile. When we found the canister, a mouse had turned the yellowed paper into confetti. That night, when we finally returned to the trailhead, I swore off ever hiking another trailless peak.

"There's a reason they're trailless," I've told anyone who suggested bushwhacking in the Adirondacks in all the years since then.

IN AUGUST 1918—ANOTHER PANDEMIC YEAR—BOB MARSHALL, AGE 17, along with his brother George and a local guide, Herbert Clark, bushwhacked up Whiteface Mountain, a 4,000-footer in the Adirondack Mountains. The adventure triggered their desire to climb all of the Adirondacks' 46 peaks measuring more than 4,000 feet high. The Marshall boys, who lived in New York City and spent summers in the High Peaks region, reached their goal in seven years. In June 1925, with Clark, they became the first three "Adirondack Forty-Sixers."

Influenced by his Adirondack quest, Bob Marshall earned his master's degree in forestry at Harvard University and then a doctoral degree in plant physiology at Johns Hopkins University. During the 1930s, he spent four years as chief of forestry for the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and then two years as director of recreation management for the U.S. Forest Service. At USFS Marshall advocated loudly to preserve primitive areas within federal

The author's friend Helena Oechsner follows Herbert Brook on a trailless trek in New York's Adirondacks. LISA BALLARD

forests. His passion for wild places led him to found The Wilderness Society in 1935. Unfortunately, he never saw one of the significant fruits of his conservation labors. He died unexpectedly in 1939, a quarter-century before the passage of the Wilderness Act.

Marshall's influence continues today. Although the Wilderness Act initially protected 9 million acres of federal land, by 2019 that amount had increased to 803 designated wilderness areas covering 111.3 million acres, thanks to this pivotal piece of legislation. Interestingly, Congress modeled the Wilderness Act after the covenants of New York State's Adirondack Park. Forty-six percent of the public land in the park (1.2 million acres) is designated wilderness, including the High Peaks Wilderness where Bob Marshall's namesake 4,000-footer, Mount Marshall (4,360 feet), is located.

Mount Marshall previously was called Mount Clinton after former New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, and then Mount Clark after Bob Marshall's friend and mountain guide Herbert Clark. The New York state legislature approved the name change to Mount Marshall after Bob Marshall's death.

TO ME, MOUNT MARSHALL WAS THE WORST OF THE FIVE TRAILLESS PEAKS I had climbed. Ever since hiking Mount Marshall in the 1970s, my hiking boots had stayed happily on the Adirondacks' marked footpaths. Until last summer.

Helena Oechsner, a friend who was born in the Czech Republic but now lives in Lake Placid, was pursuing her Forty-Sixer badge. She had five peaks left, including Mount Marshall, and she wanted someone to go with her up that dreaded peak. I politely declined, relating my experience with the mountain four decades earlier.

"I'm sure there's a herd path," Helena said. "All of the trailless peaks have obvious routes now."

The memories of my first foray on Marshall had obviously dulled with time because, a few days later, I agreed to go, which presented the next challenge. Which way? I couldn't remember the route I had followed as teenager. I recalled only a streambed that we'd waded and my disappointment in the lack of a view at the summit.

A quick internet search* revealed two main approaches to Mount Marshall as a day hike, one from Adirondack Loj near Lake Placid and the other from Upper Works trailhead near Tahawus. After examining our topographic maps and reading every possible write-up and hiker's forum on the hike, we settled on Adirondack Loj as our starting point. It would be a little longer, eighteen miles round-trip compared with thirteen miles round-trip from

Upper Works, according to the few reports we could find online and what we measured on our maps. However, Adirondack Loj was a twenty-minute drive from Lake Placid, versus a two-hour drive to Upper Works, on what would be a long day regardless of where we started. What's more, the approach from Adirondack Loj included one of my favorite stretches of trail in Adirondack Park, through Avalanche Pass and along both Avalanche Lake and Lake Colden.

A few more days passed. The more I thought about hiking up Mount Marshall, the more I had my doubts about going. The scars from my first foray to that mountain had healed, but the overall mileage worried me. At age 59, fifteen miles was my self-imposed limit for a day hike no matter where I was in the world. Longer than that, and I opted for an overnighter. Eighteen miles was well over my maximum, but camping was not an option. Helena, a doctor, had a demanding work schedule with only a few days off per month. The only day we were both free to climb Mount Marshall, August 30, was my last day in the Adirondacks until next summer.

"It's pretty flat until we reach the base of the mountain," rationalized Helena when I mentioned my mileage concerns during a phone call the evening before our hike. The weather looked iffy. I wanted to bail but couldn't bring myself to do it. Truth is, I longed for the exercise, the chance to hike with my friend and a final escape into my home mountains before heading back to my other home, in Montana, but still . . .

I've hiked a lot, but I didn't kid myself about the mileage. Even though most of the vertical gain would be during the last two miles up the mountain itself, eighteen miles was still eighteen miles, and the section around Avalanche Lake and Lake Colden included the traverse of a demanding talus field. Then my sense of adventure (and maybe a little ego) kicked in. "Don't be a weenie," prodded my inner voice. I filled my CamelBak and readied my pack.

We pulled into the trailhead parking lot at Adirondack Loj at 6:30 A.M. the next morning. Helena's 17-year-old son, Max, was with us. Max was

* Lisa Ballard researched this hike at adirondackhub.com/hiking/mount-marshall and pureadirondacks.com/blogs/Adirondack-hiking/mount-marshall. Learn about the Adirondack Forty-Sixers Club and its magazine, *PEEKs*, at adk46er.org. Visit the Adirondack Mountain Club at adk.org. See also Pippa Biddle's piece for *AMC Outdoors* on finishing the 46ers at outdoors.org/adirondack46. For maps, Ballard recommends the *High Peaks Adirondack Trail Map* from the Adirondack Mountain Club or the *National Geographic Trails Illustrated Map, Adirondack Park, Lake Placid/High Peaks, New York*.

the same age as Bob Marshall when Marshall began hiking up Adirondack 4,000-footers, a coincidence that amused us as we tromped down the Van Hoevenberg Trail through the predawn gloom.

Fog hung heavily around us in the aftermath of a three-day deluge, but the rain had stopped, and this time, I had state-of-the-art Lowa Gore-Tex hiking boots on my feet. Forty years ago, I hiked up Mount Marshall in old running shoes. At least I would have dry feet this time.

About four miles into the route, we entered Avalanche Pass. Water dribbled down the mossy walls of this deep, winding slot canyon. The expertly placed stones on the path looked like tiny islands. We carefully stepped from one to the next across the flooded floor of the pass.

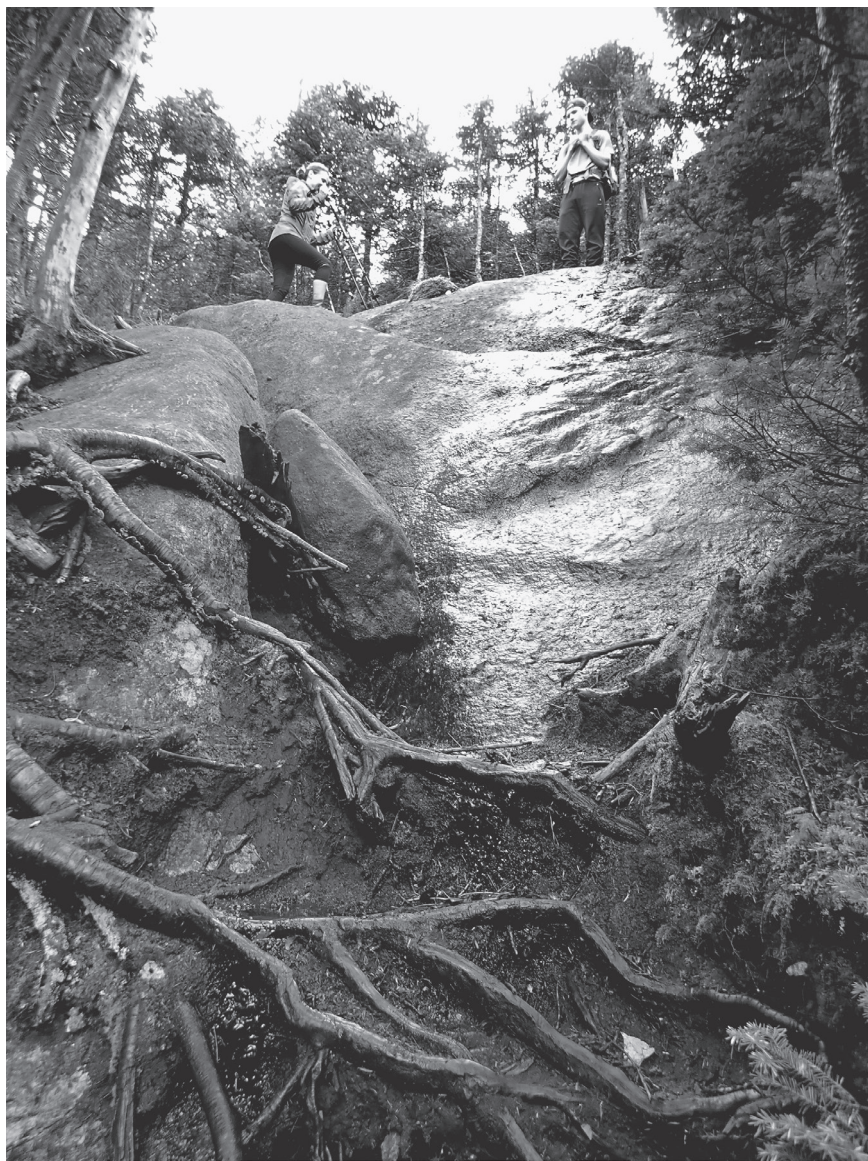
When we arrived at the edge of Avalanche Lake on the far side of the narrow ravine, the scene looked like a black-and-white photo. The sky pressed low and heavy over the water. The gray wall of Mount Colden disappeared below the surface on our left, and a shadowy shoreline held in the expanse of ink to our right. The flat blackness stretched eerily to the horizon then seemed to drain off the edge of the earth.

We skirted the right side of the lake, a boulder field tamed by a series of boardwalks and ladders, including the “Hitch-Up Matildas,” the name of the footbridges affixed to the otherwise impassable rock walls at the far end of the lake. Local lore claims a guide led two sisters along this route in the late 1800s. As the water level rose and their ankle-length skirts began to get wet, one sister said to the other, “Hitch up, Matilda!” The expression stuck.

At the far end of Avalanche Lake, we came to the junction with a trail to Mount Marcy and Mount Colden. The sign said we had come 5.3 miles from Adirondack Loj, but my GPS watch said 6 miles. I believed my watch. In my experience tracking trails for guidebooks with GPS technology, the tool never measured too long and was often short compared with actual mileage, especially if vertical gain was involved. So far, we had climbed 1,335 feet.

As we passed the Interior Outpost, a ranger station manned by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the sun popped out for a moment, highlighting a few maple leaves that lay scattered on the trail. The leaves glowed red in the sunlight, brightening the moment and my mood.

At 7.7 miles, we reached the far end of Lake Colden after navigating the cliffy shoreline. Munching on granola bars, Helena, Max, and I watched as gusts of wind shooed the clouds from Mount Colden, exposing its bare summit. The day turned brighter by the moment, but not drier.



A rock chimney offers respite from the mud. LISA BALLARD

Leaving Lake Colden, we found more water and mud than dry trail. The bog bridges became fewer the deeper into the backcountry we trekked and were soon little more than decaying logs or bunches of sticks strewn across wet spots. We knew we were close to the base of the Mount Marshall. Then,

at 8.2 miles and four hours into our trek, we came to a cairn in the woods by Herbert Brook, the stream I had bushwhacked up many years ago. A handwritten sign pointed toward a narrow path.

A path! It wasn't marked and it was skinny, but it was there. Perhaps it went the entire way to the summit. The prospect of getting to the top without perforating my skin excited me, though the mileage niggled at my mountain sensibilities. If I turned back now, I would be over my fifteen-miles-per-day maximum. We had made good time so far, but it had to be another two miles to the summit, all uphill. I took a quick inventory. I felt good. My feet were dry. I had come this far, and my friend and her son were strong hikers. I kept my concerns to myself. It was time to climb!

The trail, what there was of it, followed the brook. Bushes brushed against my pants on both sides, and we crossed the stream several times as we ascended, following sporadic little cairns that previous hikers had built to show the way. A couple of times, the route was tough to follow so we simply stayed by the brook, though not *in* the brook, as I had my first time up Mount Marshall.

I had to admit, the climb was delightful. The numerous cascades were as varied as the plants in the forest. Some flowed like broad veils. Others poured down crevices in the rocks. And yet others descended in bold, white steps. At one point, we passed the trunk of an old, dead birch tree, so big in girth that Max's hands reached only halfway around it when he hugged it. Sphagnum moss covered huge swaths of the forest floor, a lush, green carpet that the squirrels skittered across as they frantically stashed nuts for the coming winter.

"Why isn't this a real trail?" I mused. "It's so beautiful! It's a Forty-Sixer secret."

"This is like a fairy tale," said Helena, as we came to a clear pool under another cascade.

Then, as in many hikes up big mountains, we were ready to reach the top. "It doesn't look like it's petering out," said Helena after a while as we both eyed the brook. My mind wandered again to the distance we would log this day, now more than twenty miles, farther than the eighteen miles we had anticipated, which was already beyond my usual tolerance. But so far, I felt good, climbing steeply upward, breathing hard, clinging to roots in places.

Finally, the brook narrowed, then disappeared at a shallow pool that bled across a small plateau in the woods.



The hikers stayed by the brook, not in the brook. LISA BALLARD

On the map, the top of Herbert Brook appeared to stretch about two-thirds of the way up the mountain. Above it, the gush of the waterfalls gave way to the rush of the wind as the forest changed its cloak from bushy leaves to spindly fir. Glancing through the trees, we caught half-views of bald Iroquois Peak between us and landmark Algonquin Peak, further along the MacIntyre ridgeline.

As we labored upward, foot over foot, and in places hand over hand, two men suddenly appeared, descending from the summit. “There’s no view, you know,” said one.

“I know,” I whispered quietly to myself, wondering again why I had agreed to hike a marathon to the top of a viewless peak. As my thoughts drifted back to my downer on this mountain in 1977, Helena suddenly shouted, “Horam zdar!” which means “hello to the mountain!” It’s an expression that Czech rock climbers exclaim upon reaching a summit after a challenging ascent. Helena and Max were just ahead of me on top of a large boulder. The sign above them, nailed to a tree, read “Mount Marshall.” My GPS read 10.6 miles.

I recognized the summit rock immediately. I never thought I would see that particular spot again, yet there I was. After a few selfies, we dug into our

lunches. As we ate, I noticed a faint trail beyond the rock. During Helena's and my planning, we thought there might be a way to descend Marshall via Indian Pass, rather than along Avalanche Lake and Lake Colden, to make a loop back to Adirondack Loj. Maybe that was it.

I followed it a short way, then noticed a spur to my left. To my surprise, it dropped down to a perch and a view!

My jaw dropped as I ogled one of the most remote, untrammelled panoramas in the Northeast. The Santanonis, a nearby cluster of 4,000-footers all trailless, towered above a number of minor peaks. It was a spectacular, unexpected look at what was likely the same primeval scene that Bob Marshall witnessed when he stood at that point a century earlier. There landscape was void of civilization as far as the eye could see.

In 1928, Bob Marshall wrote in the *Forest Service Bulletin*, "The enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness." At that moment, peering at acre after acre of pristine woodlands and mountains, I felt the joy that Marshall described and understood how precious our wilderness areas are, not only to the ecosystems they protect, but also to the well-being of the human soul.



The Garmin watch said it all. The excursion to Marshall was complete. LISA BALLARD

We never did find the route down to Indian Pass, though we didn't try that hard after taking in the glorious view. The tiny path ended just past the spur in a tangle of trees. Rather than risk what looked like a nasty bushwhack, we decided to go back the way we had come. None of us liked the thought of potentially getting lost or potentially adding more miles to our day.

Six hours later, Helena, Max, and I walked into the parking lot at Adirondack Loj. My legs were numb from the mileage, but our backcountry marathon had turned out better than I could have ever imagined. There was a good herd path up Mount Marshall and a view, maybe not at the tippy top, but close enough. And I went a distance that I never thought I could.

Over 7,000 people have now climbed the 46 peaks in Adirondack Park over 4,000 feet. Helena has her badge. Will I finally go after one, too? I'm thinking about it now that the trailless peaks in the park seem more hospitable to hikers. Regardless, the next time a friend asks me to climb Mount Marshall, I'll say yes.

A longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, LISA BALLARD grew up climbing mountains in the Adirondack High Peaks region. She has trekked up peaks all over the world, taking photos and writing about her adventures for magazines and websites. She lives in Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York. Visit her at lisaballardoutdoors.com.

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